

## The Wild Swans

Far away, dwelt a king who had eleven sons and one daughter, named Eliza. Their father, the king, married a wicked sorceress. She told the king so many untrue things about the young princes that he gave himself no more trouble about them.

“Go out into the world and look after yourselves,” said the queen to the princes. And they were turned into eleven beautiful wild swans.

With a strange cry, they flew through the windows far away to the seashore.

When the sun was about to set, Eliza saw eleven white swans, with golden crowns on their heads. The swans alighted quite close to her, flapping their great white wings. As soon as the sun had disappeared, the feathers of the swans fell off and eleven beautiful princes, Eliza’s brothers, stood near her.

She uttered a loud cry. They laughed and wept and told each other how cruelly they had been treated by their stepmother.

“We brothers,” said the eldest, “fly about as wild swans while the sun is in the sky, but as soon as it sinks behind the hills, we recover our human shape. Therefore, we must always be near a resting place before sunset; for if we were flying toward the clouds when we recovered our human form, we should sink deep into the sea.”

“How can I break this spell?” asked the sister. And they talked about it nearly the whole night, slumbering only a few hours.

Eliza was awakened by the rustling of the wings of swans soaring above her. Her brothers were again changed to swans. Toward evening they came back, and as the sun went down, they resumed their natural forms. “Tomorrow,” said one, “we shall fly away, not to return again till a whole year has passed. But we cannot leave you here. Have you courage to go with us? Will not all our wings be strong enough to bear you over the sea?”

“Yes, take me with you,” said Eliza. They spent the whole night in weaving a large, strong net of willow and rushes. On this, Eliza laid herself down to sleep, and when the sun rose, the wild swans took up the net with their beaks and flew up.

They were far from the land when Eliza awoke. By her side lay a branch full of beautiful ripe berries; the youngest of her brothers had gathered them and placed them there. Onward the whole day they flew through the air like winged arrows. Eliza watched the sinking sun with great anxiety, for the little rock in the ocean was not yet in sight.

Presently, she caught sight of the rock just below them. Her brothers stood close around her with arms linked together, for there was not the smallest space to spare.

At sunrise the swans flew away from the rock, bearing their sister with them. At last she saw the real land to which they were bound. Long before the sun went down, she was sitting in front of a large cave, the floor of which was overgrown with delicate green creeping plants, like an embroidered carpet.

In her sleep, a fairy came out to meet her. “Your brothers can be released,” said she, “if you have courage. Do you see the stinging nettle in my hand? These you must gather, even while they burn blisters on your hands. You must weave eleven coats with long sleeves; if these are then thrown over the eleven swans, the spell will be broken. But remember well, that from the moment you commence until your task is finished, you must not speak. The first word you utter will pierce the hearts of your brothers like a deadly dagger. Remember all that I have told you.”

Eliza awoke. It was broad daylight, and she went forth from the cave to begin work with her delicate hands. The ugly nettles burned great blisters on her hands and arms, but

she determined to bear the pain gladly if she could only release her dear brothers.

At sunset, her brothers returned, and when they saw her hands they understood what she was doing. The youngest brother wept, and where his tears touched her the burning blisters vanished. Eliza kept to her work.

One coat was already finished and she had begun the second, when she heard a huntsman's horn and was struck with fear. In a few minutes, all the huntsmen stood before the cave. The handsomest of them was the king of the country, who advanced toward her, saying, "How did you come here, my sweet child?"

Eliza shook her head. She dared not speak.

"Come with me," he said. Then he lifted her onto his horse. She wept and wrung her hands, but the king said, "I wish only your happiness."

Then the king declared his intention of making her his bride, but the archbishop whispered that the fair young maiden was only a witch. The king would not listen to him and led her through fragrant gardens and lofty halls, but not a smile appeared on her lips. She looked the very picture of grief. Then the king opened the door of a little chamber in which she was to sleep. On the floor lay the bundle of flax which she had spun from the nettles, and under the ceiling hung the coat she had made.

When Eliza saw all these things, the thought of her brothers and their release made her so joyful that she kissed the king's hand. Then he pressed her to his heart. She loved him with her whole heart.

At night she crept away into her little chamber and quickly wove one coat after another. But when she began the seventh, she found she had no more flax. She knew that the nettles she wanted to use grew in the churchyard and that she must pluck them herself.

With a trembling heart, Eliza crept into the garden in the broad moonlight till she reached the churchyard. She gathered the nettles, and carried them home with her.

Only the archbishop had seen her. Now he felt sure that his suspicions were correct; she was a witch and had bewitched the king and all the people. Secretly he told the king what he had seen and what he feared.

In the meantime, she had almost finished her task. Once more only must she venture to the churchyard and pluck a few handfuls. She went, and the king and the archbishop followed her. The king turned away his head and said, "The people must condemn her." Quickly she was condemned to suffer death by fire.

Away from the gorgeous regal halls, she was led to a dark, dreary cell. They gave her the ten coats which she had woven, to cover her, and the bundle of nettles for a pillow. But they could have given her nothing that would have pleased her more. She continued her task with joy and prayed for help.

Now all the people came streaming forth from the gates of the city to see the witch burned. An old horse drew the cart on which she sat, dressed her in a garment of coarse sackcloth. Even on the way to death, she would not give up her task. The ten finished coats lay at her feet; she was working hard at the eleventh, while the mob jeered her and said: "See the witch; she sits there with her ugly sorcery. Let us tear it into a thousand pieces."

At that moment, eleven wild swans flew over her and alighted on the cart. They flapped their large wings.

As the executioner seized her by the hand to lift her out of the cart, she hastily threw the eleven coats over the eleven swans, and they immediately became eleven handsome princes; but the youngest had a swan's wing instead of an arm, for she had not been able to finish the last sleeve of the coat.

"Now I may speak," she exclaimed. "I am innocent."

"Yes, she is innocent," said the eldest brother, and related all that had taken place. And a marriage procession, such as no king had ever before seen, returned to the castle.